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BELIEVE

It is a simple word.

It is an inspiring word. It is a vague word. It is a positive word. It is a faithful word. And now, in 2003, it has become Baltimore's word.

How it came to be that is an interesting confluence of history, politics, personalities and providence. It is a story about a new kind of marketing campaign – the kind that seeks not to position a product, but rather to change an entire cultural environment. What began as a simple police and anti-drug effort has evolved into a broadly ambitious evangelization of deep-seated change. It has become a device for coordinating and uniting the non-profit community with city government to fight a scourge. Believe is now the catalyzing word that has placed the city of Baltimore at the onset of 2003 squarely within a unique moment of perceived possibility.

But as with every marketing campaign, timing is everything. Mayor O'Malley's "tipping point" window has clearly arrived. The next several months will be the crucial ones that decide whether the Baltimore Believe campaign succeeds at its audacious, almost naively ambitious idea of systemic societal change or tips backward into the historical dustbin of political folly. O'Malley calls the illicit drug problem a "chemical attack" saying it has destroyed more lives and property in Baltimore than two world wars and the fire of 1904 combined. When O'Malley shunned a gubernatorial run, citing "unfinished business," this is the business of which he spoke.

Success will require the bringing together of Baltimore's notoriously scattered agenda. O'Malley's potent skills as a communicator will be severely tested – not only has an effort like this never been tried in Baltimore before, it has never been tried anywhere before. Bringing the urban community and spiritual leaders together behind a common goal with the non-profit sector, city government and the business community is more difficult than herding cats. But to do so, he first had to issue a clarion call and ask everyone to, well, believe.

BELIEVE IT CAN BE DONE.

It began in a church...

...an appropriate venue for a campaign requesting miracles. It was Israel Baptist Church on Chester Street – Rev. Wilson's church. It was April 2002. I was one of a handful of print reporters there.

But the gallery was filled with bipartisan political firepower. Mayor O'Malley was joined that day by U.S, drug czar John Walters, Congressmen Bob Ehrlich, Elijah Cummings and Roscoe Bartlett. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Joe Curran, Dutch Ruppersburger, Donna Jones Stanley and police commissioner Ed Norris also spoke. But the most moving statements came from Rev. Wilson, City Comptroller Shelia Dixon, Hopkins neurosurgeon Dr. Ben Carson and NAACP president Kweisi Mfume – four city leaders for whom hatred runs deep for the scourge that took the lives of family or friends. "You have to understand," thundered Mfume, "this is personal!"

It was the launch of the Baltimore Believe campaign – an anti-drug effort that has come to resemble a runaway train in some ways. In the church that day, they played a commercial which was soon to hit the airwaves. It featured a young black boy struggling to make sense of the swirling drug culture that surrounds and penetrates so deeply into his life, shaping his destiny. The message was clear – his destiny, ultimately, is the same as the city in which he lives. Standing quietly in the back of the church, arms folded, was a Cincinnati raised man named John Linder. Few people in the church knew him, but Linder was the artistic and theoretical force behind the commercial. I'd seen him, and his commercial, once before.

The Big Ask

About six weeks prior I'd received an unusual letter. The mayor was asking the heads of all the city's major media organizations to join him for a presentation. That morning, the mayor delivered the "embargoed" news that he was going to launch a new anti-drug campaign. I was already a little annoyed – had I known the presentation was "embargoed" I might not have attended. I'm philosophically opposed to honoring news embargoes. News embargoes are how PR companies try and make sure they control the timing and impact of a message or product launch. Editors who honor them place the marketing needs of some company or organization above the concerns of their audience – misplaced loyalty if I've ever heard it. This case was a little different, however. This was certainly no ordinary marketing campaign.

O'Malley had his hand out that morning. He was asking for a 4-for-1 buy on television advertising and wanted four straight minutes of ad time for his commercial. The four minutes part had the television station general managers squirming – they don't have four straight minutes of ad time. WBAL-TV president Bill Fine says the solution wasn't all that hard to accomplish – his station just shortened one commercial break and tacked the time on to the next one. "Once we realized what [the campaign] was, juggling the slots wasn't that unreasonable."

O'Malley introduced John Linder, who played the commercial and explained the theory behind it. "This campaign is going to start very dark," he explained. "And then bring people into the light."

Most advertising campaigns attempt to associate a product with the five things people are regarded as wanting – wealth, youth, health, sex and less fear. If the advertising can address at least one of those desires on some level, it is generally

seen as effective. But Linder's advertising wasn't trying to satisfy anyone's appetite with some product or idea. This campaign was an attempt at mass psychology. "It's the process of trying to connect people to what they more deeply want in a way that gets them to see past that which keeps them from acting," he explains.

In other words, the campaign's initial goal was to change Baltimore city's cultural environment, its mindset – something a lot larger than your typical marketing campaign. Linder's commercial sought to incorporate a number of personal issues, from racism to feelings of helplessness, all with the goal of helping the police department focus the community on uniting to fight drugs.

The seeds of **BELIEVE**

Not that long ago, Baltimore had a mayor who actually favored the legalization of some drugs. The city, not surprisingly, became one of the most drug-ravaged in the country. While many cities in the rest of the country prospered during the go-go Œ90s, Baltimore became the nation's heroin capital and its population dropped by 12 percent as people fled the city. Jobs in Baltimore declined 17 percent during what, for most of the country, was the century's biggest job boom. The public school system collapsed. In 1999, Baltimore led all major U.S. cities in some pretty terrible categories. The city was number one in murder, violent crime, property crime and drug-related emergency room visits. The disheartening figures were directly linked to the drug infestation problem that was devastating the city. But the worst aspect was what was happening to the next generation. Addict parents left children out on doorsteps while they got high inside drug dens and forgot about them. Those children, Baltimore's future, were the biggest victims of all.

The surrounding counties were no less immune. Heroin pumped out of the city straight up I-795 to high schools in Westminster, up I-95 to Bel Air and up I-83 to Cockeysville. Those communities and most others struggle daily to battle the destruction this menace wreaks on families, schools and businesses. But in the suburbs, the end of the line for addicts has a reasonable chance of being treatment somewhere. In the city, jail or death are more likely scenarios.

When a little-known city council member named Martin O'Malley pulled a surprise victory in the 1999 Democratic primary, he knew right away that he had his work cut out for him. In Baltimore, the Democratic primary is the election. Once O'Malley secured that victory, he began to plan his governance. At that time, he read an article in Newsweek written by Jack Maple. O'Malley tracked Maple down and called him. As it turned out, Maple was in Washington DC that day with his partner, John Linder. The three agreed to have dinner the same evening.

When you learn who Jack Maple was, you begin to understand where the Believe campaign comes from. Maple was the deputy commissioner of the NYPD who developed that city's highly acclaimed "Comstat" system. His chief operations commander was a protégé named Edward Norris. Maple's system rested on four major elements – accurate, timely intelligence, rapid deployment, effective tactics and relentless follow-up assessment. When Maple vaulted to second in command at the NYPD, it signaled a new culture that rewarded cops who fought crime rather than simply responding to it. His approach to policing and his book, *Crime Fighter*, have revolutionized criminology over the last decade. More than anyone it was Maple, not Rudy Giuliani, whose ideas cleaned up New York.

In one way or another, Maple had been intimately involved in the turn-arounds of the New York subway and transit police, as well as reformations of police departments in New York, Boston, New Orleans and Newark. Baltimore's comstat system is based wholly on Maple's work.

At the time they met O'Malley, Maple (who died last year) and his partner John Linder, were running a management consulting firm in which helping leaders create systemic change was their core business. The two agreed to assess the police department, create a plan of action and work with police leaders to put changes in place.

"After examining the progress made by the police department and the stumbling blocks still before the mayor, Linder recommended a radical kind of marketing campaign one that would shock the population awake and "light a fuse of popular will" within the residents of Baltimore."

The initial key to cultural change, says Linder, is brutal honesty about how the systems have broken down. In Baltimore, things were broken aplenty.

One of the first moves O'Malley made in office was to bring Norris to Baltimore as a deputy police commissioner under the newly appointed Ronald Daniel. After just 57 days as commissioner, Daniel resigned amid a conflict with the mayor over implementation of Comstat. Daniel was resisting and Norris moved up to take his place. Norris came into the job with two strikes against him – he was a white cop from New York. His confirmation period was acrimonious, to put it mildly, being told things like, "You sit like a racist." But he and O'Malley visited churches and schools around town and eventually succeeded in gaining some respect in certain key quarters in the African-American community and, more importantly, later succeeded very quickly in bringing down crime rates.

After two years with Norris as Commissioner, Baltimore led large cities in reduction of violent crime and drug-related ER visits. The city was second in reduction of property crime and third in reduction of murder.

Two years earlier, he and Maple had sat down in the Oriole Bar above the downtown Sheraton and sketched out the policing plan on bar napkins. Norris held Maple's deep conviction that fighting crime requires proaction, not reaction. "Responding to 911 is not a way to reduce crime," he says. And though the plan worked to a large extent, Norris recognized that the city could not arrest its way out of its drug problem. His thorniest issue was still the pessimism and deep cynicism of a city that had grown accustomed to drugs and tolerant of the crime that came along with it.

Lighting the fuse

At the end of 2001, Norris and O'Malley had come to realize that in order to truly turn the city around and create positive momentum that was sustainable over the long term, they had to convince the city residents that the city was turn-around-able. They had to inspire change and they turned to John Linder.

In the Maple/Linder partnership, Linder was the man who had the greater grasp of marketing. He was a whiz at focus group analysis and could deftly deconstruct social problems. After examining the progress made by the police department and the stumbling blocks still before the mayor, Linder recommended a radical kind of marketing campaign – one that would shock the population awake and "light a fuse of popular will" within the residents of Baltimore.

O'Malley also wanted to use the campaign to shock awake another segment of Baltimore – the non-profit community. Linder told me that Baltimore has more non-profit community organizations than any other city he's seen and many of them came to be because the business community perceived that the government

wasn't properly doing its job. The organizations often operated under their own agendas, acting almost like a collective shadow government. O'Malley was finding that the other significant place cynicism ran deep in Baltimore (besides the media, of course), was the non-profits. They just were not sold that he was different from the line of mayors that preceded him. They weren't convinced that his "can do" attitude would translate into "done."

The third area Linder recommended attacking with the campaign was Baltimore's latent racism. If Baltimoreans are pessimistic about change, they are nearly in denial about the extent to which this city has segregated itself. "Baltimore is surprising divided racially," Linder told me. "There was a luncheon of the police foundation a year ago that had maybe 350 people at it and there was not a single black person in the room. It was amazing to me. It's a two-thirds African-American city, as is New Orleans, but you would never see that in New Orleans."

Linder decided that in order to truly change attitudes, the city would have to be united racially behind a common goal. That would require brutal honesty about the underlying racism that exists when white suburbanites drive into the city to buy drugs. Both races would need to see they shared a problem, if they were to unite to fight it.

A marketing strategy evolves

Linder decided that his initial marketing campaign would require two key components. First, he would playback the framework, language and perception of the deeply ingrained negativity via a television commercial. When fighting the subway problem in New York, Linder learned that even though the city had cleaned up the subway, polling revealed that people still believed that the cars were graffiti riddled, even though it wasn't true. Why? It was because the changes had occurred incrementally and the perception of nasty subway cars was very deeply held. He learned that in order to change minds, the validity of the earlier perception needed to be acknowledged. Baltimore struggled with the same problem. Norris had already helped turn the police department around, but the public appeared slow to grasp the changes.

Secondly, Linder searched for a buried value. He found it in the children abandoned on the streets of Baltimore to fend for themselves. Linder decided to center his TV commercial around a 10-year-old boy, one that would symbolize Baltimore's future. It was based on research he'd done on drug addicts – Linder discovered that even the worst addicts have "moments of clarity," times when they can clearly see what their addiction is doing to themselves and those around them. The child would be an attempt to inject a moment of clarity into the addicts of Baltimore and get them to seek help.

Adults also tend to unify when they see children as being at risk. The commercial would try to attack white racism with the line, "they think I'm a drug dealer – that's all they think I'll ever be."

"We're trying to say that our [white people's] unconscious stereotyping of black males creates a lot of violence," says Linder. "It creates a lot of hopelessness in these kids, which leads to violence. It creates a lot of self-hatred. It's important for us to recognize that if we consciously or unconsciously harbor these preconceptions, that we have to let them go."

Mixed results

Linder constructed the fuse to his explosive TV commercial, but O'Malley found he had to light it earlier than was optimal. According to Believe co-chair Michael Cryor, the political campaign season was fast approaching and after May, it would become impossible to get the airtime they sought. If the ads didn't air in April, they would lose the rest of the year. Funds were available from the police foundation and O'Malley quickly pulled the trigger.

"Frankly, I think the campaign took hold better in the black community than the white community," concedes Linder. He tells a story of seeing a couple of hundred addicts crying in a church telling him how real the commercial was to them. "It was a rare moment of relief. If it hadn't seemed truthful to them, in my opinion, it wouldn't have seemed truthful to anybody."

But many in the white community seemed puzzled or unaware. Linder seemed truly disheartened by the coverage of the Baltimore Sun. "They gave more coverage to Dutch Ruppersberger's attempt to get the county council to give $5,000 to the campaign than they did the launch of the campaign," he claims. "They really didn't cover the campaign. In one article later on, they said the campaign increased drug mentoring calls by three percent, but in actuality, it had increased calls by 300 percent. I find that almost an assassination. It's almost willful."

Disgust with print media aside, Linder is quick to admit that the biggest mistake made by the campaign was not adequately explaining itself to the middle class. The mayor can't really blame the Baltimore Sun for not adequately carrying the message, because in the 21st century, when someone sees a banner, bumper sticker or button that reads "BELIEVE," they don't turn to the newspapers to find out more, they go online. The campaign's failure to create anything more than a bare bones website was clearly the biggest misstep. "That, I would say, is my biggest disappointment," admits Linder.

The pot boils over

In the summer of 2002, crime problems in Baltimore were beginning to get more than the usual notice. There were plenty of shocking crimes that summer. A thirty- five year old police officer was killed in the line of duty – she was responding to an officer in distress call. A priest was shot by a man whom he had molested years earlier. But as troubling and sensational as those and many other events were, nobody was prepared for the finale in Autumn when a crime shook Baltimore to its very core and struck deeply at he heart of the Believe campaign.

On October 3, the E. Preston Street home of Angela and Carnell Dawson was firebombed. The family escaped unharmed and the fire was put out. The couple was actively engaged in combating the drug dealers who preyed on their neighborhood. They were exactly the kind of "Believers" O'Malley had been seeking out. Residents who were unafraid of reporting drug trafficking to the police. When police offered to move the family, they refused, saying that they would not allow drug dealers to run them out of their home. Several weeks later the brave couple and all five of their children were murdered in a second firebombing attack.

Baltimore exploded with the news.

National media descended on the scene as a burned out rowhome became ground zero in America's war on drugs. The echoes to September 11 were eerie – this was urban terrorism – thugs looking to intimidate a community.

On Nightline, frustrated residents vented, fumed and wept. In City Hall, frustrated city officials did likewise.

Enter Johnnie Cochran – armed with insults to add to injuries. Cochran's law firm is threatening to file a lawsuit against the city on behalf of relatives of the Dawsons. Cohran's suit would blame O'Malley's Believe campaign for their deaths. If the campaign hadn't encouraged the Dawsons to speak out, the thinking goes, they wouldn't have died.

"O'Malley has succeeded wildly in doing at least one thing with the Believe campaign – he has created a viable brand."

Unwilling to arm Cochran with any further ammunition, few officials would speak publicly about the case. Colonel Norris would only say, "Consider the source." But given that taxpayers would foot the bill for any settlement, Cochran's suit is like a third firebombing, only this time, the target isn't citizens who help police, it is a marketing campaign that asks them to do so.

The future of **BELIEVE**

Despite the difficulties, O'Malley has succeeded wildly in doing at least one thing with the Believe campaign – he has created a viable brand. City slogans are notoriously awful and usually pathetic. When "The City That Reads" was unveiled, cynics quickly redubbed it to "The City that Bleeds." It had no resonance at all. This is not so with Believe – it has truly touched a chord. O'Malley has found his administration's brand. He is busy at work "Rebranding" old city programs under the new brand's umbrella. The Baltimore Neighborgood program was recast last month as "Believe in your Neighborhood." We will soon be hearing announcements about the "Reason to Believe" program and other efforts designed to place infrastructure and real assets behind something that until now was little more than a mantra. Michael Cryor likens what happened to the Believe campaign to a party with an open-invitation policy where far more people showed up than was anticipated. For the last several months, the mayor was busy running to the grocery store to get food.

"I think a relatively successful political mobilization campaign has evolved into a movement," says Wally Pinkard, co-chair of the campaign and CEO of Colliers Pinkard. "I don't think that anyone really expected that."

Pinkard says there is a lot of effort going on in various sectors trying to address the issues, needs and opportunities raised by the campaign. "We created a bunch of expectation and didn't have the capacity to meet every bit of expectation in every single arena and have been attacking those areas so that we can meet the expectations – I see that as very positive."

Pinkard says "Reason to Believe" is going to involve non-profit leaders and business leaders coming together to make a serious commitment to help the disadvantaged. Early whispers say that upwards of $30 million to $40 million is being assembled. Pinkard concedes that the evolution of the campaign has been an organic, create-as-you-go experience that has not always been pretty to watch. The fights over increased funding for drug treatment and opening up drug treatment slots has been a stumbling block. Also of concern has been the level of disconnect about the campaign between city residents and suburbanites. "We're going to take the campaign more forcefully to the suburbs," he says. "This is a 120,000 person problem and half of them are not in the city."

The leadership challenge

When Wally Pinkard wears his BELIEVE button and someone asks him what it means, he has a short answer: "Believe that drugs is our city's biggest problem, believe that we can do something about it and believe that individuals and organizations have an obligation to do something about it." Pinkard says that the third statement is only now starting to truly gel and mobilize as people keep looking around and seeing the banners. "We're the only community in the United States that is boldly proclaiming that we're going to do something about this and the momentum that I'm getting now in January and February from the business community is far bigger than last year when the media was being blitzed. Now, instead of individuals coming together, we have major organizations coming together formulating strategies that they believe will make a long-term difference."

But while Pinkard and all the other constituencies behind Believe scrambled, the marketing momentum has been stalling. Many observers have been unable to discern whether the campaign is going somewhere or fizzling out. Mayor O'Malley likes to talk about how Baltimore is at a "tipping point" of opportunity. But the test for the Mayor will be to show whether he believes in the power of his own marketing campaign or not.I asked O'Malley who his key "point man" was behind the Believe campaign and instead of a single name, he rattled off several. Over the course of investigating the campaign, the very first thing I discovered was that nobody was willing to claim ownership over it not even O'Malley. I asked Pinkard if the website was being fixed and he didn't know – "there are a couple of chiefs here," he said. There sure are. Linder was upset about the Sun's coverage, but attempting to create comprehensive reporting on the Believe campaign is a bit like playing "Who's on First?" with Lou Costello.

If Believe has evolved into a movement, it has done so without a key operations person guiding it.

Key leading indicators

The Believe "movement" is at a dangerous crossroads right now. Should it fail, the epitaph will probably read, "when all was said and done, more was said than done." Whether or not that tombstone arises depends fully on what happens in Baltimore over the next several months. One key leading indicator to watch is the relationships that develop between O'Malley and the Ehrlich camp and the Baltimore Police Department and the Maryland State Police. Simply put, they all need each other.

Things are not off to a good start.

When Ed Norris resigned as city police commissioner to take a job as superintendent of the Maryland State Police, O'Malley was clearly miffed by the move. Norris, who has shown a clear interest in fighting terrorism since his days in New York, is sure to be a key player as the Department of Homeland Security decides how to develop cooperation with state law enforcement agencies. It is a logical move for Ehrlich to take someone intimately involved in the early development of the crime mapping principles behind Comstat and place him in a position to do even more good with his expertise. Norris will likely have a much easier confirmation hearing than he did in Baltimore.

And even Baltimore should benefit. In New York, Norris was good friends and a mentor to Kevin Clark, O'Malley's new pick for the top job. Clark was recommended by Norris. Notes Pinkard, "One of the positive things about him going to the state police was that as police commissioner of Baltimore City, he was a guy who was very frustrated that the state police did not do more for the city. He's now in a position to solve that frustration."

And yet, O'Malley claims that since Norris' departure, the two have not spoken. Norris claims to be getting a cold shoulder from city hall. The potential is there for the top cop in Baltimore to have a close relationship with the top cop in the state, who just so happens to live in Baltimore. But so far, it is not happening in the early stages.

A missed opportunity such as that would be tragic, whatever the reasons for the spat. If Believe is going to work in the long run, at the end of the day, it will have to walk hand-in-hand with what it was before it was a movement – it will have to be part of a police effort. Drugs are a smuggled commodity and police need to share intelligence and work together in order to fight the scourge.

All the slick marketing in the world can't get around that.